

## Chapter Five

Age is an important variable in assessing the needs of fathers and families and the possible role for social intervention. Men at different stages in the family life-course tend to have different needs, problems and struggles, while each age group or life-course stage represents particular kinds of challenges for social professionals, calling forth the need for varieties of knowledge and skills. Younger marginalised men who become fathers are perhaps the most, at risk, yet invisible category of all. Typically, the position of men in public debates about 'teenage pregnancy' or 'unmarried mothers' is so absent and negative it as if the children had no fathers at all. Moreover, the implications of the (apparent) absence of those fathers from their children's lives is rarely seen as an issue of social concern. Nor is the fact that many younger mothers apparently have to parent alone, or at least without the support of an intimate male partner. At its worst, the underlying assumption seems to be that families are better off without such young fathers because they are invariably irresponsible and uninterested. In any case, it is women who parent and all the social and cultural supports that do exist are organised around their needs.

Against this background, we were very concerned in this study to include the perspectives of younger vulnerable fathers, and their families and to investigate how they father, their relationships

# 5



Beyond 'protest  
masculinity':  
Younger vulnerable  
fathers and social  
intervention

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with their children, their needs, interests, desires and what kinds of social supports and professional help can assist and develop them as fathers. Inevitably, given that the study in general needed to include vulnerable fathers with a range of problems and backgrounds, the numbers of younger fathers in our sample is small. Yet the qualitative case-study approach we adopted provides such rich data on the lives of these fathers, their partners, children and the perspectives of the professionals who worked with them that significant recommendations for policy and practice can be made. This chapter is built mainly around two such case-studies of younger marginalised men, drawing from interviews with the fathers, mothers, and at least one relevant professional who knew the family.

Our findings show that, typically, younger fatherhood is unplanned. But this does not mean that it is (always) unwanted. On the contrary, the very marginality of the young man, the absence of other prospects in terms of education and work, can heighten the desire to construct a meaningful life, to see oneself as a worthwhile person and make a tangible contribution through fatherhood. The younger fathers in our sample went to extraordinary

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lengths to remain involved with their pregnant partners and form loving committed relationships with their babies. They had to, such was the pressure by family and professional agencies to exclude them. If a marginal young man in Ireland today wants to become a committed involved father with his children, he not only has to deal with the usual joys and challenges involved in making such a rite of passage - especially the adjustment to an altogether new form of responsibility - he has to overcome the immensely powerful pressures that exist to exclude him from his child's life. In most cases it is a matter of vulnerable young fathers remaining involved with their children despite, not because of professional systems. A powerful

exclusionary dynamic comes from the state itself as the social welfare system creates a financial benefit for mothers to claim lone parent family benefit and for fathers names not to be put on the birth certificate, in effect for them not to be seen to officially exist. The paradox is that while officialdom generally fails to see the presence and importance of these fathers in their children's lives, in reality the men are active, committed carers, and seen and valued by their partners as such. Yet these young men also have serious problems, the most significant of which is an unreliability which makes their consistent support for

their children and partner uncertain. A core challenge is to move them beyond what Connell (1995) calls a 'protest masculinity' where their wildness is tamed to the extent that they can remain with their children and partners and in their families (as opposed to prison, for instance). We show that when child and family services do include such fathers, and do so in the particular ways that we outline below, the men and their families are able to use them to help them overcome some of the adversity in their lives to develop into still better, more reliable, fathers.

### 5.1 Entering fatherhood at a young age and in the context of marginality

Sean Whelan is 19 years old, unemployed and the father of three year old Rory. He became a father at the age of 16. Sean's partner Maeve is 19. Her first child, Jane, was born when Maeve was 14 years old and was taken into care at birth. Both grew up in poverty in families where their fathers drank excessively and were physically violent to all of the family. Maeve could not remember her father ever doing anything good for her, while Sean recalls horrific violence at the hands of his father, but also him doing good things with them. As a child Maeve was sexually abused by her brother and his friends, who were 'baby sitting' her. Maeve spent time in a psychiatric hospital because 'she was a nervous wreck'. Sean became homeless at the age of 14 when his mother and younger siblings moved into a women's refuge. Sean's exclusion from welfare services simply because of being a man began young. Due to his being over twelve years of age Sean was not offered a place in the refuge and so was placed through the health board in the care of neighbouring friends. However this placement soon broke down and Sean found himself living on the streets. He drifted into petty crime and served prison sentences. The couple met when Sean was 16 and Maeve 15 at the women's and children's residential unit while Sean (although in care and living on the streets) was visiting his mother. Thus Sean and Maeve's baby was conceived at a time when they were teenagers in need of services and supports themselves. From the outset Sean - at the age of 16 - approached becoming a father with a positive, responsible attitude:

*Maeve told me she was pregnant and, ah, I told loads of people, I was delighted. Before Maeve got pregnant you know I always said to myself, I'm never having kids,*

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*you know! But I always said to myself I wouldn't take off and leave someone. I never would, Right? I'd never take off and leave her to look after the children on her own, like I'd always stay to help, you know.*

Professionals, however, did not construct this as a case requiring a response that would include the (young) father in the pregnancy. Rather the intervention quickly became focused on working with the teenage mother towards having her place her second child in care, to the almost total exclusion of the father - despite his and his partner's desire for him to be centrally involved. The juxtaposition of Sean's commitment, and his exclusion by services is stark. Having a child was even the reason he had 'gone on the straight and narrow'; the fear of separation from his child being the guiding force in his trying to keep himself out of prison, which could have drastic implications:

*"So if I went away again [prison] what would it do to her [his girlfriend] then, you know. Eh, suicide then would be my only way out like d'you know what I mean? Then I can't go through with it because of this, [Rory] is the one that, that's holding me back. But I'm going to end up or I have a feeling I am anyway, but um, even, it's tough going like, just can't see another way out. Either prison or suicide like back up there like you know, I just can't handle it at all."*

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Significantly, fatherhood was seen by marginal young men in this study as at least one way for them to achieve something in life, in the context of a totality of perceived failures, in education, work, family relationships, crime and so on. In effect, committed fatherhood for such young men can be seen as a vital route to social inclusion. This makes the failure of services to understand, engage or help such men to meet this vital aim all the more regrettable.

Maeve was clear that neither of her two pregnancies were planned. She was encouraged by social workers to 'press charges' against the father of her first child, Jane, who was conceived when she was 13 and born when she was 14. This baby was placed in foster care straight away, 'I wanted to look

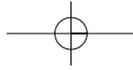
after her, but I couldn't do it. Her mother was prepared to support her and have her and the baby move in, but her father would not. Having been put out of her own home by her father, she began taking drugs and alcohol, "to take my mind off where she [Jane] was. To stop myself from thinking how my life could have been, and how it was now and all this like. My child was gone."

Maeve's second teenage pregnancy quite easily confirmed her pejorative status as a 'high risk' young woman. She and Sean had only been together three days when she became pregnant, the first time he had ever had sexual intercourse. The immediate response of the social services was to move her 80 miles to a hostel for pregnant mothers in need of accommodation and support. The fact that this placement was at such a physical distance away from her home town did not arise so much from the scarcity of such services in Ireland but the fact that it was strategically used by the professionals to actively exclude and get rid of Sean from Maeve's and their child's life. Maeve - who spoke well of the support she received there - saw her time in the mother and baby unit as her chance to prove to the social workers that she was able to keep and look after her second child.

*I didn't want to go there but they all agreed, the social workers, my father everyone that I had to go there. You see they all [social workers] wanted to take him [Rory] off me. But then when I had him and I never thought there would be a baby that would be that small, do you know what I mean? So I thought to myself I'm not going to stay in [...] because I knew that if I did the child would be gone and I wouldn't get my chance you know ever to take him home with me. I'd three months to prove it to them.*

Initially, Maeve's new address at the centre was kept a secret from Sean and none of the professionals ever spoke with her about him or the couple's plans.

*He was trying his best you know, he was saying he'd stay by me now and, d'you know, he used to get things for me and the baby, he'd buy the nappies for me and he'd buy the baby's food for me and clothes for the child and he bought me the bottles for him.*



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Sean clearly realised the very difficult position Maeve was in and stood by her in her attempts to prove she was a good enough mother:

*They [social workers] were going to take Rory off her, you know what I mean they'd no reasons now, they were going to take Rory. So Maeve said to me they're not getting him like Jane. Maeve was pregnant, like, as soon as he was born they would tear into her, as soon as the baby's born now he'll have to go into care and all this kind of shit like. And Maeve said in that case so she was after having Jane in [place], you know so she said if that's the case I'll fuck off like.*

In a desperate attempt to keep her (as yet unborn) child, Maeve decided to make a run for it, with the active assistance of her own mother and a collection of other friends in a highly organised break out from the mother and baby unit. She was found and placed in a secure unit. This shows how child protection services can label such 'unruly behaviour' as evidence of a 'lack' of care on the part of the young mother rather than as a primal reaction to a very deep concern to care for her unborn child. She was eventually returned to the mother and baby home to give birth.

Sean was permitted to keep telephone contact with Maeve who felt "he was unreliable then. He'd ring me one day, and then nothing again for a month. Then he would ring me again." But Maeve believed it was worth trying to work through their struggles because "I don't want Rory to grow up without a father" and "I love him [Sean]". After a time Sean was given some practical support by way of one return bus ticket each week to travel the 80 miles to see Maeve.

*I was talking to her constantly on the phone, every day like and I went to see her at weekends. Now I get a ticket off the social workers, they pay your bus, up there and back. So that was grand, I went up there on the weekends, grand like. But they only ever give you one ticket you know per week. But I wanted to be up there every single day like, you know what I mean? I didn't want to be apart from her at all. But that's the way, so we went through a bit of a rough patch because I suppose with Maeve just because you know she was so far away. ... We talked; she knew I*



*wanted to be with her but there was nothing we could do about it, you know. We'd no money, no money to pay for bed and breakfast up there for holidays, we'd no money for that, we're not working.*

Such enforced separations occurred despite Maeve wanting Sean to be as actively involved as possible in the pregnancy and birth process:

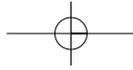
*The best thing for a father is to be there, like I wanted Sean there when Rory was born. But then when I went into labour I tried to ring him from the labour ward. But then he was on the bus coming down to see me, when he got here all he said was 'why didn't you ring me like?' You know.*

Sean did not allow missing the birth through no fault of his own to dampen his enthusiasm and love for his child.

I was well chuffed now, oh delighted. So, ah, that was magic, delighted with myself like. I'd a camera with me and all. I had the camera all that day like just using up film after film after film after film. Maeve, she was worn out like. Worn out. It was a long enough labour all right and when I saw him [Rory] first he was so small and everything I was nearly afraid to lift him up or anything. But one or two days later like I started picking him up and feeding him. It took me one or two days to get over the nerves.

## 5.2 Growing into parenthood

Sean and Maeve both wanted to be active in parenting their son together. However the social work and family support services still failed to consider this new family as a unit deserving of recognition or support and not a single discussion was facilitated involving both parents about their future. Despite the demonstrable commitment of the father to overcome the obstacles placed in his way and the mother's desire for him to be involved, the case was constructed as a 'single teenage mother'. In order to prove her competence as a mother, Maeve stayed with Rory in the mother and baby unit for a whole year before she



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returned to her place of origin to live with Sean. Following the birth of their child even the limited practical support for Sean from the social work department diminished and he struggled to get a regular bus pass to visit his family.

*I was only up there every month with the social workers looking for the tickets. I got them once a month. Instead of building it up they dropped it [visits/ bus passes] off. I'd be there saying to them when am I going to get the tickets? When will I get the tickets? When will I get tickets? I used to go into the social worker, but I used rarely see her you know, she could be behind the scene there, I'd say can I speak to [social worker]. They'd just say she's not in here at the moment and there was often times, there was often times when they said she wasn't there and I was only just out the door and I'd see her coming round into the office like, d'you know what I mean? I caught her then you know. I didn't get on very well with her because of that.*

They eventually moved into a 'cramped' two-bedroomed flat, and it was initially 'hard' getting used to one another. The effect of the previous year where Maeve was the sole parent to Rory and Sean a visitor to his family, had a significant impact. Sean felt that he had to learn much later than Maeve how to care for his son:

*Because she, she worked through, went through it you know, she knew when to give him solids and everything. I wouldn't have a clue. I'd just say I don't know what he wants or what I should do. Just like, she just adapted to it faster, more like, I don't know. But she was always always with him from the very start you know. I used to look after him alright but she was constantly living with him all of the time in [place] you know, like she was there since the day she was born. While I was only visiting them so he barely knew me for the first year.*

Maeve recognised how nervous Sean was about caring for Rory in the beginning but praised and encouraged his involvement as an 'involved father' (Lupton and Barclay,1997):

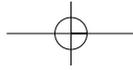
*He's grand with Rory there and all, changing nappies and washing him, so in the beginning he'd be afraid if the baby was alright. He was afraid of dirty nappies but*



*he got used to them like he changes nappies fine now and when Rory has a dirty one he says, 'I've a dirty nappy!' It is hard like when I had Rory first he was so small I didn't know what to do with him you know, the nurses showed me how to feed him his first bottle and then after that I was grand. But um his sister, he was living with his sister for a while and she had a child, you know and he used babysit as well you know he'd do baby-sitting. He's a grand [ie, good] father anyway now, when he looks after Rory I don't have to worry I know he always makes sure he has his dinner and he looks after him and makes sure he gets whatever. He takes him off to town and everything like. I don't know it just comes natural d'you know what I mean? It's hard to explain. You'd have to see him with him, the way he plays with him now and everything. He loves to play football with Rory and he takes him for a spin on the bike, brings him to the park, Rory loves the park.*

Yet, our findings suggest that acquiring the capacities for active fatherhood is not simply a 'natural' thing. What this couple are describing is the classic pattern in how women and men become established on different developmental pathways as parents. While health, social services and family conspired to provide significant supports to help this very vulnerable young mother to learn to be a parent, nothing whatsoever was done for the father - other, that is, than sending him negative exclusionary messages about fatherhood. Our findings bear out other research which suggests that men's caring energy and desire for connection as a father increases dramatically around the time of the birth (McKeown, Ferguson and Rooney, 1998). By ignoring him, the services missed a vital opportunity - a fateful moment - which could have maximised this man's opportunity to bond with his child and begin to develop his capacities as a father (Hawkins et al. 1995). As well as his deep motivation and inherent ability to care for his son, this man's partner was a crucial resource for him as a mentor in guiding him into parenthood. She had the upper hand. His humility in accepting his need for support from her and their ability to pull together as a couple helped to see them through what for some are intractable difficulties, but this was not without its costs.

The wider implications of this can be seen in terms of how couples 'do gender' (West and Zimmerman, 1987) in relation to who does what in the home. Sean sees Maeve as the



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primary parent, with himself playing a supporting role. According to him Maeve does most of the cooking (five days out of seven); she "mostly" cleans the house, and plays more with the children - "she just seems more playful than I". She brings the child to the doctor when he is sick, gets the medicines and so on. He does all the mending and fixing and fetching jobs, including going for shopping on his bike. His passion is for "Fixing push bikes, I love it. The one thing I do in the whole world that I'm good at doing. I've been doing it since I was knee high to a grasshopper, fixing bikes for myself, brother, neighbours, what have you." When he looks after the child his big worry is that Rory may get sick and he won't know what to do. For him, the most important thing a father can do for a child is "Love him, stick up for him like you know. Try and watch out for him you know what I mean teach him to go away from trouble". As for how he shows his love to his son:

*I just take him in me arms every night, if we're watching tele like I cuddle and kiss like. When he's in bed I tuck him in and all, kiss goodnight and all this kind of stuff like. At night if he needs anything, more times I get up and I go to him, all that kind of stuff.*

Maeve was more positive than Sean himself about his level of active involvement in household chores and direct care of Rory and paints an egalitarian picture of the division of domestic labour:

*Well he'll do the cooking and I'll relax and I'll wash up after him, then he'll wash up after me. If we were cleaning the place I'd go upstairs and tidy upstairs while he's hoovering the kitchen. So we don't, like I don't want him to hassle me and I don't hassle him, we do, we share it, we share the jobs. We do an equal share of the housework and care. I'm the one that will get up and dress him, wash him, change nappies, make sure he's fed. But then again I get the day when I don't feel like getting up and Sean will take over and he'll do it for me you know. So I think the two of us would, like if he was tired now I'd just let him sleep on I'd just leave him in bed all day and say grand you know I'd do the cleaning over him. But this morning I did hoovering now yesterday, but today obviously he's at home so he'll*



*clean up for me, wash the ware and Hoover the place and tidy what needs to be tidied and that like. But mostly like if I go out with Rory once a week or twice a week I go and he'd stay home and he'd clean up before he goes out you know.*

While not unhappy with his contribution, the mother clearly sees herself as the domestic gatekeeper, as unambiguously in control, with the man doing things “for” her, helping out. I make all the decisions about him [Rory] I always make them over everything like, when he goes to bed or what he wears going out like, or what he can eat. I know I'm right and Sean says fair enough.

Both parents believe that the most important thing a father could do for his child is ‘to love him’, or as Maeve put it, ‘to always show his true feeling to his child.’ Neither believed that a father’s main role was to earn money to provide. While both believed that the mother was the ‘real expert’ and decision-maker, they shared an expectation that the father should do more of the disciplining, that Sean, in Maeve’s words, should be ‘more strict’, playing the traditional disciplinarian role of ‘wait till your father gets home’ (Hogan, 2002). While she would never slap him, Sean would favour “tapping his nappy” to “show him, teach him like”. For Sean this role of disciplinarian was the very aspect of his ‘father work’ that he found most difficult and stressful.

While it was not happening ‘all of the time’, their different approaches to parenting Rory was causing arguments and a strain on their relationship. Sean remained isolated and without any outlet to talk about or develop his own parenting style.

*I just talk to meself there now, go out into the kitchen and start talking to myself like, fucking this, fucking shit you know, this kind of stuff, getting frustrated.*

### 5.3 Men talking to themselves: The absence of social supports for fathers

“Just talking to themselves” is the position so many fathers find themselves in because they are ignored by services. Sean is explicit that

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*Maeve does all the talking to the social workers because she had another child you know, so she sees the social worker for that child. But there's no social worker all the time for Rory like, you know. But there's one there [for Jane]. ... There's one or two of them [social workers] calls, she has plenty of people to talk to if she wants. When they call like they say to me 'how are you like and how are you keeping' and all this like, but any details then about Rory or Jane, whatever, it's just Maeve and them. They go into a room on their own you know. Yeah. They'd be talking to Maeve. They never talk to me about being the dad.*

*If I answered the door at say twelve o'clock in the morning to the social worker they'd just say 'hi, is Maeve there?' I'd say she's in the kitchen, and I'd just call her, 'Maeve, the social worker's there for you.' And then the social worker goes into the kitchen so they can talk, in the kitchen, just the two of them like in the kitchen. So I go to them like 'how are you doing?' 'I'm grand.' That's it then, that's the only thing that'll ever be said to me then. They never said to you, would you sit down and talk with us or whatever or we'd like to talk with you, never.*

For reasons to do with them both claiming social security benefits as single people, Sean was not meant to be 'officially' living with Maeve and Rory and claimed that 'the social workers know like but they said they would not tell on us.' However, he felt that his lack of official status as a father was related to the way he is left out of discussions by social workers. Yet Sean himself also contributes to his exclusion, partly because he himself has never really considered that he might have an important contribution to make to discussions. For instance, social services were considering allowing Jane to stay with them overnight:

*I suppose I wouldn't mind being asked what I think as well like, you know.  
... No, I didn't really think of it much before you know. I was just leaving it up to Maeve like when there are any social work meetings organised like to plan like kids in care, like reviews Maeve goes to that. But I'm never invited.*

Here, again, Sean has constructed Maeve as the gatekeeper of whether he will have meaningful contact with social workers. Ironically perhaps, Maeve was convinced in the research interview that she would like social workers to include Sean. Yet she doesn't appear to have done much to try and facilitate it. This exclusion of the father, we want to argue, arises from two main sources: the powerful influence of social security fraud and fathers' lack of official identity as fathers which leads both mothers and fathers to publicly deny their role, and place in the family. And, secondly, the tendency for professionals to disregard fathers to the extent that they are barely seen to even exist. Even in situations where there have been prior concerns for child welfare, where the very integrity of the family and placement of the children at home is at severe risk, fathers are not considered - be it as a risk or a resource.

#### 5.4 One-parent family payments and the social exclusion of (single) fathers

This couple were both in receipt of social welfare payments, Maeve the lone parent payment, and Sean the dole as a single person. They 'simply could not afford' to live off the one payment they would receive if they officially lived together as a family. The couple approached the allocation of money in a traditional way, with Sean handing over 60 of his 77 pounds income each week to Maeve - "I don't really need anything, nothing really, just fags". Maeve managed the finances because he was "no good when it comes to money".

Our findings show that the provision of welfare payments to lone parent households actually acts as a disincentive to the 'official' unity and integrity of families. In Ireland, most one parent family payments (97 per cent) are paid to mothers (McKeown, Ferguson, and Rooney, 1998). While this shows that the majority of lone parents in Ireland are mothers, and there can be no dispute that lone parents need a reliable and secure means of supporting their children, one of the central conditions of making the lone parent payment to mothers is that the woman may not cohabit. The direct effect of such a condition is to exclude both birth fathers and step-fathers who are in relationships with women on social welfare benefits from (officially) living with their partners and children. The lone parent family payment therefore is a structural impediment which can and does function to exclude fathers and undermine their role both practically (financially) and

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symbolically (as important if only in a bread-winning capacity) within families. McKeown (2001) argues that while the state has taken over the bread-winning role of the father it has done so in a way that supplants rather than supports the fathering role:

In practice the one-parent family payment can turn single fathers into a risk to, rather than a guarantee of, the family income. Even the mother who is successful in getting maintenance from the father finds that, except in certain circumstances, the one-parent family payment is correspondingly reduced thereby making the father's net contribution redundant. Moreover, where co-habitation occurs with the consent of the mother - and is therefore technically illegal - the one parent payment leaves the father in a wholly ambiguous situation of living in a home where he is wanted but not supposed to be. For all of these reasons the one-parent family payment undermines single fathers and, notwithstanding its benefits to mothers, it is now time to ask if there is not a less divisive way of supporting single parents and their children in disadvantaged communities.

Sean and Maeve are one of the many couples in our study who lived this shadowy existence of being together, unofficially, in order to acquire a higher income from social welfare payments. They run the risk of being caught for welfare fraud, while Sean lives his life as a father being undermined by the very system of lone-parent family financial support in which he is complicit. The costs to him of this official exclusion are evident through all areas of his life. The complex systemic relationship between Sean's status as an 'unmarried' father (thereby having no automatic legal or constitutional rights to his own birth child) together with his 'unofficial' status as a (resident) father due to the couple's decision (on economic grounds) to claim two separate social welfare payments, played itself out in an array of interrelated social domains. This included: (a) his lack of official identity as a father which undermined his role - both financially and symbolically - in the family; (b) his exclusion from visits and family support work offered by community care social workers; (c) his (and the family's) lack of access to suitable and affordable accommodation; and (d) his lack of access to medical care and treatment.

The secrecy and 'official' confusion as to where Sean really lived played itself out in a very real way when it came to his trying to claim for the medical card that he was entitled to. Without a home address that he could give to the Health Board Sean found it impossible to get his medical card, and found himself going without necessary medical care for himself:

*My chest is killing me, I was just in agony like, pain, all this pain I could feel it all through my body. I used to know my old GP like, but I've only seen my new one once and everything, the antibiotics I needed were around a hundred and nine pound and I hadn't got a hundred pound, you know what I mean? So I just bought a few, four for eleven pound that's all the money I had to spare. I've no medical card I've sent away for it twice and they keep saying in four weeks to come back and that were nearly two year ago. If I could get the antibiotics it'll be gone. But I've no medical card I don't know how many times I'm after sending off for one and I haven't got it. The antibiotics would cure it but we can't afford it. I can't afford to pay a hundred pound.*

In terms of their accommodation needs, because they are 'officially' two separate claimants they are by necessity defined as two separate 'households.' Therefore Maeve and Rory are given either local authority accommodation or 'rent allowance' towards private rented accommodation, but either source of accommodation is restricted to the needs of a single parent family, with the result that the living space is always tight and can often be a major cause of tension. The net effect of all these layers of exclusion for this young man and family were nothing short of potentially disastrous. Not only his fatherhood status, but the man's very health and survival is at stake.

This case study highlights the specific needs for support in such 'high risk' young pregnancies and births to teenage mothers and fathers. Sean's and Maeve's narrative of life as young people and then as young parents is one which highlights the continuity of needs and risks involved for children and families who live in poverty and social marginalisation. It could be argued that, notwithstanding these various layers of exclusion that Sean experiences in his daily efforts to be an actively involved and caring father and partner, he

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is the very variable that has made the difference in this young family, whereby Rory was not taken into care by social services. Maeve was both older and more secure and settled, yet she herself is very clear in her recognition that it was Sean's 'standing by her' that made all the difference. However, Sean was never included by professionals who never shifted from framing the work in terms of a 'young single mother' and her children. In fact the only part of the public domain that confers and identity on Sean is the criminal justice system, where he is viewed simply as a danger and possible risk to others. In the process, both the resource that Sean represents to his child and partner and the risk that his social exclusion represents to himself remains hidden from the gaze of professional services.

#### 5.5 "One of the boys": Young fatherhood and protest masculinity

The second case-study of younger vulnerable fathers and families contains many of the elements of the first. What is distinctive about this case is that the father, Raymond Jones, was included and strategically worked with - along with his very vulnerable partner and their two children - and significantly helped by a family support agency. The main problem with the response in the Whelan case was not the provision of residential care for the mother and baby as such - Maeve Whelan was effectively homeless and sufficiently vulnerable on a number of criteria to seem to warrant such a response - it was the omission of the father from support and therapeutic work. What the mother and baby home provided was in essence a place to 'hold' or 'contain' the mother as she entered parenthood where she could develop her parenting capacities.

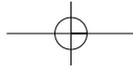
It was precisely this kind of work that was extended to both Raymond Jones and his partner Ann. Raymond is 23 and first became a father five years ago when he had a child with his ex-girlfriend and has maintained regular contact with that child. He now has two children with his partner Ann, Olive, 3 and Jonathan, 2. Ann and the children reside in a homeless unit for mothers and children, while he stays temporarily with his parents. By any standards Raymond relates a wild lifestyle. From the age of 10 he started misusing substances: "Drinking, smoking hash and taking tablets. Anything at all, sniffing gas and petrol". He first recalls getting into trouble for vandalism at the age of 5 and got into all kinds of trouble growing up, including injecting frogs with bleach, and taking, driving fast and burning out

numerous cars. At 17 he became a drug dealer. He has served time in prison and is regularly in trouble with the law. He is a recovering alcoholic and heroin addict and at the time of the research interviews had been struggling to remain clean for nine months. "I don't feel 23. I feel about 30, 29 or 30."

He was "delighted" at the prospect of becoming a father, embodying that pattern where vulnerable young men see fatherhood as an opportunity to succeed at something meaningful in their lives: "Because the road I was going down, like I was saying, I can't, I didn't want to live like that no more you know." His ex-girlfriend became pregnant when he was 17 - he "never got used to" contraception - and he was heavily involved in all the pregnancies and births of his children. Even though he and the mother of his first child weren't even together, he went with her for "every check, every scan she had, yeah. I was with her all the time". He wanted to be at the birth of his first child but missed it, because, he believes, he was deliberately excluded by his ex-girlfriend's family. For him, "it's my right as a father to see my child being born, that's how I think of it anyway. Fuck sake, I put it there, you know". Unmarried father's struggles to be included are a significant theme in his narrative:

*I think women think when they're pregnant right, it's my child, my child. It's all my child, you know what I mean? And especially when they're not with the father. It's even more my child, that's what they're thinking.*

Raymond and Ann planned their first child, Olive. Motherhood has changed Ann "completely. I was a wild child as they say. But I'm after settling down now though. I've no other choice really." According to Ann, she knew Raymond was an honourable man because of how he told her honestly when they first dated about his child and because of his evident commitment to the child. Her motivation was to have the baby so that she could hold onto Raymond - "I thought if I had a child by him that I'd be able to keep him". Ann was brought up mainly by her father as her parents separated when she was young. Her father treated her as a drudge - she did all the housework and care of him and her siblings - and regularly physically abused her. Her hopes for a partner were:



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*Well I was looking for somebody that would be good to me and somebody that would respect me and trust me. And I suppose well I do have kids like but at the time I was saying and if I did have children to, to want to look after them the way he's supposed to, like any other father would do. I just wanted him, you know, to love me. What he's supposed to do. And to respect me and to be there for me and the kids whenever we need him.*

Now she "has him" she knows Raymond "wouldn't do any wrong to me". After her father, she just couldn't cope with another abusive, drunken man. Out of desperation she and Raymond tried living with her father for a time, but it culminated in Raymond beating her father up because of how he treated Ann and the children. It was this which led her to live in the homeless mother and child accommodation and get the intensive family support discussed at length below.

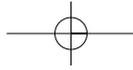
Raymond began to form a bond with Olive when she was still in the womb. "When he was there at home now if she kicked there inside in my stomach he'd be feeling it and he'd have his ear down to my stomach. He was, he was very anxious about her really, d'you know. He was delighted even when, d'you know, if she kicked now he'd go "your stomach is moving!". As an expectant father:

*He was, he was brilliant. He was better than I expected actually. He was, d'you know, he used come up to the hospital when I used get my scans and he used be all excited when he'd see the photography. He couldn't believe like that it was a baby he was looking at. His baby. And he used come to the doctor with me and when I was going in to have her then he came into the labour ward with me.*

Raymond was present at the birth, which for him was:

*Brilliant! Brilliant! Can't explain it like, I remember the time, the day, I remember everything, I can remember the whole day. D'you know, and the 2 of them. And there's a kind of a connection then with myself and Ann you know, a stronger connection because I seen the child being born, because if I'd seen [first child to ex-*





*girlfriend] being born, more than likely I would have been back with [ex-girlfriend], d'you know. I'm definite about that...*

The birth process created a 'connection' which affirmed his commitment to his partner and awoke him further to his new role and responsibilities as a father. The increase in the man's generative energy and desire to care for his child and journey with his partner as parents is palpable. Raymond's narrative is infused with a great sense of moral duty to his family. By both his own and Ann's account he was an active father from the outset. He would happily get up in the night to see to Olive: "I didn't care as long as I'd the baby in me arms, then I was happy". For him a good father is one who can

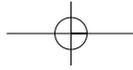
*Love them and be there for them. That's all I can do, I think. You know what I mean, because they mightn't do the right thing, d'you know what I mean. That's what I think and if he's man enough to put it there like, you know what I mean, if he's man enough to put it there he should be man enough to look after it. That's the way I look at it. Love, that's all they want I suppose. Money and all these material things, you know, they're not going to matter, that's the way I think.*

He describes the experience of loving and being loved in this way:

*It's good I suppose, it's brilliant, it's brilliant in a way because I know there's some fellas there only having and they're fucking going mad over it. D'you know what I mean. And they're abusing drugs and they're abusing drink because of it like and that's why they're going to jail and you know what I mean.*

In articulating his own joys of parenting he compares himself favourably to men who cannot gain access to their children. His world view on fatherhood is heavily shaped by marginality and feelings of insecurity and the risk of losing his children that comes from having few rights. "I've no rights as a father because I'm not married". This is exacerbated by his name not being on the children's birth certificates. The rationale for this is that if his identity is officially unknown there will be less chance of them being suspected as cohabiting. This again has to do with the couple maximising their income by creating a





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situation where the mother can claim the single-parent allowance. Thus not only have he and Ann never officially lived together, his official existence as a father is further wiped out because his name is not on the birth certificates. In his experience all this gives the woman huge power in the relationship, which they are fully aware of. Getting the father's name onto the birth certificate is a crucial step forward he believes:

*That's my suggestion, depending on the circumstances, on the man and woman who's having the child. If he's working, if he, I'm not a politician or anything, I don't know all these fucking politician words like, but I think it should be on the birth cert and a second name, d'you know what I mean, as a second name.*

According to Ann, Raymond is:

*A brilliant father. Very good. I mean, he was there a while ago before you came up yourself and he was lying down on the bed with the kids and d'you know he makes up all his own kind of stories and d'you know things like that and he'd be colouring with them and oh he idolizes his kids, he do, even when he was away from him. I stopped the kids from seeing him and I was sorry I did because it made him worse, because he couldn't see his kids. And even his other child [...] he goes he travels to see her as much as he can like. ... He's very good with the kids. And they, you'd know by looking at them like they're happy children because, you know, they love him too and they love me as well.*

The impact of Raymond's absence from the children - such as a recent month long spell in prison - is clear for Ann in how Olive lost weight and was actually hospitalised because "she was very sick over him". She "was all the time looking for her dad" and has been putting the weight back on since Raymond's return. However, at three and half the child is barely speaking and is having speech therapy.

Their second child was not planned and has been more difficult to manage. It was then "definitely things started going downhill." Ann describes Jonathan's constant crying (for at least the first year of his life) as almost giving her a nervous breakdown and as almost



splitting her and Raymond up. He feels that Olive is closer to him as she "can get around him", whereas Jonathan is "always fighting with him".

The big problem for this couple has concerned creating stability in their own and the children's lives. Raymond and Ann split up a year previously after they moved onto a council estate where he just knew too many people and was hanging out with them. Ann went off with one of them and Raymond gave him such a beating that he ended up in hospital. Raymond left town and started consuming huge quantities of drink and drugs "every night to forget about the kids". He returned to their home town after a few months when Ann said she wanted him back, but he felt she only wanted him as a babysitter. He started "heavy on the heroin" and ended up living on the streets for 4 months where he also drank excessively. Ann said she would take him back, but he took an overdose and ended up at his mother's. She arranged for him to have residential addiction treatment and he has been (more or less) dry and clean from drugs now for about 9 months and attends AA. He did however go on a drinking binge just two days before the research interview. Michelle, meanwhile, became homeless and was admitted to the homeless mother and children unit.

Raymond's overall estimation of himself in terms of his domestic commitment, housework and child care is that "I do me best like, you know. I do me best for them. You can't do any more". He conceded that he and Ann used to argue about this, "Oh, stupid things, you know what I mean, always over stupid things. Me missing all day or something like".

*Oh she wanted me to do what she wanted, d'you know that kind of way. Not what I wanted, not what the two of us wanted, but what she wanted. And fuck that, you know. Some days I'd do it just to keep her happy like you know.*

Other days he'd ring the lads and go off with them for the day "For a bit of peace". He does not appear to regard his pattern of disappearing like this as significant. Being - or trying not to be - "one of the boys" forms an important part of Raymond's narrative. His ex-girlfriend (17) went off with someone else soon after she got pregnant, which "broke my heart". He interprets this as happening because he was trying to settle down into

## Leaving Fathers Out

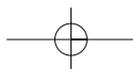
responsible impending fatherhood, he'd got a job and was giving up the drugs and drink:

*just because I stopped being one of the boys like you know, she wasn't wanting to go out with me any more, d'you know that kind of way. So she just, that's why she wouldn't go back with me.*

**Excluded young men tend to enact what Connell refers to as 'protest masculinity', a way of being men - "one of the boys" . . .**

Yet, he never fully ceased to be one of the boys as life for him is a constant struggle not to act on his desire to do wild things, "Oh you know, all these fucking things would be popping into me head when I'm walking through town like". He does still get into trouble. As Ann put it, "I wouldn't even ask him any more because he's after being up in court so many times".

Excluded young men tend to enact what Connell refers to as 'protest masculinity', a way of being men - "one of the boys" - articulated as a response to their marginalisation - from the labour market, education, the family. Men's practices of drinking, violence, and criminality together constitute a public acting out of a 'hard-man' image. Their status and definition of themselves as men is given meaning through protest, an acting out of being against everything that is seen as socially valid. Through interaction in a milieu of poverty and an ambience of violence 'the growing boy puts together a tense, freaky façade, making a claim to power where there is no real resources for power' (Connell, 1995, p.111). As Connell observes of the pattern, "There is something frenzied and showy about it." Crucially, however, it "is not simply adopting the conventional stereotype of masculinity" (p.110). As our data shows, these young men are perfectly at ease with non-traditional gender roles which involve attempts at egalitarian relationships with women and actively nurturing their children. Connell (1995: 111) recognises how this involves "a lot of concern with face, a lot of work put into keeping up a front". The crucial issue for social professionals is what to make of the façade – indeed, to recognise it as a façade - and what lies behind it? It is tempting to regard these young men as constructing a false-self system behind which there is no organised character at all, as evidenced by the periodic massive drinking and drugs binges and riotous behavior. Fatherhood in the context of youthful protest masculinity constitutes a new challenge of



public management of the self, how - or perhaps if - to continue to be 'one of the boys' while having to be for something, developing a new narrative of the self in terms of child care, nurture and responsibility. Our findings show, categorically, that the front that vulnerable fathers keep up to the outside world (including social workers) constantly belies the active, nurturing side of themselves that they may express in private.

When asked if it had significantly changed things having a baby in the house? Raymond Jones replied "Yes and no".

*Yes, with being quieter and being, d'you know, being more careful and more responsible. And the no side of it is just live like everyone has to live. D'you know what I mean. It's just the way, some things haven't changed much.*

Raymond's re-evaluation of self even extends to questioning the entire value of traditional markers of protest and hard-man masculinity. When speaking of his "loads" of tattoos, he emphasises, "I did like them when I was a hard man that time. They're a sham like, so I had to get tattoos". Understanding the multiple sides to such men is important to appreciating their struggles and working effectively with them:

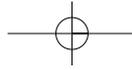
**Interviewer:** Some of the stories when I listen to you, you used the word, like being a hard man ... there's bits of your story that you know are really hard and there's other bits of you that are really soft, like looking after your kids and...

**Raymond:** That's the way I am like.

**Interviewer:** Which are you? Are you both? Are you either?

**Raymond:** Both, I'd say, when I have to be. When I have to be, but I don't want to be. It's not who I am, who I am is, I'm loving and different to that with my kids but if I





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have to be, d'you know what I mean, I'm going to protect myself and protect me family. That's the way I look at things.

The tension at the heart of domestic commitment and identity formation for vulnerable young fathers is, how to reconcile active responsible fatherhood with the enactment of a protest masculinity; the struggle between the caring man and the wild man. It is not, as our findings show, that the fathers are not good enough parents in their own right when they are with their children. It is the unreliable aspect to them, their tendency to disappear

**In important respects, services don't have to do anything other than work creatively with the energy and passion that is already there . . .**

and be unaccountable that renders absolute trust and reliable parenting so difficult. The question for policy makers and practitioners is how to maximise the development of the nurturing man without denying his youthful, wild masculinity, the very fire which ignites and drives his passion to care and protect? In important respects, services don't have to do anything other than work creatively with the energy and passion that is already there. As we show throughout this study the dynamics of love and intimacy transform lives, that "connection" that Raymond Jones spoke of on witnessing his partner give birth to their daughter. Ann, for instance, represented herself as a calming influence on Raymond, as tempering his wildness, setting boundaries across which she was not prepared for him to go, if he wished to continue being with her and the children. She emphasises how much she loves Raymond and it is her desire to see him stable and healthy, which led her to, for instance, recently warn him "don't even think

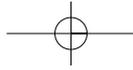
of coming here because you know I won't have anything to do with you when you're drinking". Here again, just like with the Whelan case, women/mothers are constructed as mentors for (wayward) men. These narratives are classically gendered, in that, while motherhood is represented as having tamed 'wild' women, it is those same mothers who are also expected to do something similar with the rough edges of the wild men that fatherhood has still not managed to 'smooth out'. Even the women's strength is rarely enough, as the mothers themselves are invariably vulnerable and in need of help and support. In some relationships it is the man who is the reliable partner, making up for the mother's waywardness. It is not that the men do not ever give the necessary support, but



that the need for strategic intervention arises when neither partner is ultimately stable enough - in their own right - to hold the family together. Our findings suggest that the key requirement in work with vulnerable young fathers (and mothers) is to find a way of containing and channeling their energy and passion, of 'holding' the man in his family sufficiently to enable the development of his caring capacities and their triumph over the desire for protest. Even if social workers did engage with them, conventional casework approaches to such men are of limited value as a strategy for developing them as fathers. The most it can offer - a trusting relationship and advocacy - have their place, but these men, because of their marginality, need much more. The 'holding' of the men and/in their family that is required, needs an actual physical environment, a place to which they can attach, where the necessary concerted work can be done.

#### 5.6 'Holding' and working with 'wild' young fathers, mothers and children

Raymond and Ann eventually found this holding environment in a hostel for homeless mothers and children. The agency policy does not allow men to sleep over - the unit would like to enable fathers to but can not due to the fact that families/women share some aspects of the living areas - so men must leave by 10pm. Aside from sleeping over, they now attempt to include the father as far as possible in all aspects of family life and the work they do with them. Raymond is clear that he was invited in by the agency on the very first day: "When Ann was going up I went up there. They asked me did I want to be involved and I said I did, d'you know". Crucially, in terms of a strategy for beginning to engage vulnerable fathers, the unit staff are very aware of the culture of deception arising from lone-parent allowances and actively work against it. They soon noticed a pattern where, with the mother having insisted that there was no father involved, suddenly a man would appear at the unit on a daily basis, yet, so far as the official system was concerned he did not exist, despite sometimes years of his partner's involvement with the Health Board. While recognising the fears of the women, they openly challenge the vested interests mothers - and indeed fathers - have in talking down the nature and quality of father's relationships with them and the children, and their tendency to minimise his presence in the family to social workers and other 'officials'. As the unit manager explains:



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*"And for all the fathers we'd have dealt with here it was their first time ever being asked to be involved with their kids in any structured way with professionals. We would know because we would be the only people who've asked them. We would always say to a woman referred here we would say have you got a partner? Is he involved? And is the plan to move back with him? Don't bother I don't care what the health board, what you're telling the health board, tell me what's really happening and if there's a father-figure involved I would say to the health board we're not taking the family in unless I can work with him as well. And that's what's happened because there isn't a point, there's no point in doing a whole lot of work with mum and kids, having her in a routine and then go back to somebody else who hasn't got that information who hasn't been in the learning process. And it's all going to be wasted."*

The agency learned through experience that including fathers made good practical sense for all concerned if the work done was to have any lasting effects.

Ann finds the unit "brilliant. I love it up here". Although there because of major social problems, she does not feel judged by the staff. Rather, their approach is such that she feels affirmed in her parenting. The rules of the unit she finds "strict": "I mean they have to watch you ... when Raymond goes away by night I have to knock on the staff room door and say Raymond is going away. ... You couldn't do nothing out of the way and they'd know about it". She values the practical help with things like budgeting, which they cover with the couple together. Overall, Raymond feels the impact of the unit has been such that he has never seen Ann and the children "looking better". Yet he is frustrated by the fact that he has to leave by 10pm, which means he can't be as fully involved in the family's life as he wants to be. Ann also misses having him there as a support and for the closeness of waking up beside him each morning. He is, however, allowed to get as involved as he wishes during the day:

During the week, she's working 9 to 5 above and I'll go down to the crèche now and get the kids and bring them up to [the unit] and get the dinner on for Ann and stuff like that, it's grand like. ... [I'd] play with them and change them and give out to them and, d'you know everything a father should like.



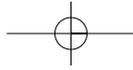
The unit staff regard Raymond as an involved, committed father:

*He gets on very well especially with the daughter who's the eldest of the two. He, yeah, he'd push the pram up and down you know he's no problems with that. He'll go shopping, he very much like wants to do things with the kids, have a bit of craic with them. And he does get on well with them. You know, they're delighted to see him coming in you know.*

The value of such an intensive (residential) approach is evident in the opportunity it creates to help couples resolve disputes, especially those which arise when fathers do become more involved in child care and domestic work. As a family worker explains:

*he's very into cooking, he has a background in [working in restaurant kitchens] and is very eager to do it. Whereas his partner, obviously she's lived, they've been on and off together ... she hasn't been able to rely on, she hasn't been able to rely on him. So she's very much in control of the kitchen, you know. It's her space. And she cleans up in a certain way and she, god, can't stay in the room when he's cooking because it'd drive her bananas. D'you know, so we've kind of worked it in a way that OK, if it does, then like come out and have a cigarette or something and let him at it d'you know. He, I think it's a way of getting him into being part of the placement because obviously if he's got to leave at a certain time he can't be here the whole time. I suppose he's going to feel he's missing out on something or he's not here the whole time. So the cooking is a huge part of it. ... and he loves doing it, d'you know. It's a way of getting her to relax around things as well because she's very into like, tables have to be cleaned down and pots have to be washed the minute they're used, you know.*

The unreliable side of these fathers leaves a sense of total responsibility with the mothers, who then struggle to let go of control. Their belief systems, and internalisation of the oppression of being solely and ultimately responsible for the children leads to tensions around the father being 'good enough' domestically, when he is involved. As this family worker spells it out: "she's finding it I think just a small bit hard because he is kind of



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invading her space. I mean this is, you know, her flat, her cooker and you know the way I tidy the room and she admits to that completely". Intervention work which helps the woman to let go of control and responsibility, and the man to accept it in a way which gives him a legitimate and trustworthy space in the domestic life of the family, is crucial to balancing the developmental pathways of couples, to creating negotiated outcomes in terms of gender roles and relationships.

According to the family workers, they have a good relationship with Raymond who values the service. "He's delighted to be here. He's made a couple of comments once or twice that he'd love if it was a complete family unit as in that he could stay overnight". An important feature of successful engagement and 'holding' of such service users is the capacity of workers to accept the multiple sides to the men and give them a fair chance. The Jones's family worker had learned:

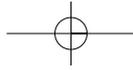
*not to be intimidated and just to basically to try as much as possible, I mean obviously to have a history of someone is important before they come in here, but as much as possible to put that history, you know, behind you as well, or just to allow them to come here with a clean sheet.*

Yet, a striking feature of Raymond's narrative is a struggle to admit his need for social intervention, or that it has had any positive impact. In saying this we do not mean to impose a requirement that fathers should appreciate it. The point rather is the lengths some men go to actively deny their need for help, even, ironically, when they are receiving it. When asked is there anything he'd like to be better at doing, he replied: "No. Why should I try to change myself for other people?"

*I don't know, well as far as I'm concerned I don't care about social workers and all these people. I don't care about them. As long as they know my kids are alright. And as long as they know I'm looking after them. Fuck it, you know, I don't care about them. Why should I? Not being smart or anything by saying that, but.*

Ann and he would never have to ask for advice about how to bring the children up because "we know our kids, their personalities". He denies getting, or even needing support from AA.





Chapter 5

All they do is make him feel better because he realizes some are worse off than he: "No I don't get support, but I listen to people and they're worse off than me like". Nor does he easily accede to having got any real help from the mother and child unit because he was okay to begin with:

Interviewer: Do you think since you've been going down to [the unit] you've improved as a father?

Raymond: No.

Interviewer: You haven't improved?

Raymond: I improved meself before I went, d'you know.

Interviewer: OK, what, OK, that's a better way of saying it: what are you getting out of going to [the unit]?

Raymond: Oh now I'm getting you. A bit of joy like, a bit of peace with me kids. You know. A bit of freedom like you know, with no one telling me what to do and doing what I want to do.

Interviewer: Would [the workers at the unit] praise you, would they notice things that you do and kind of?

Raymond: That's, they might, you have to ask them that. ... I don't be, I don't be looking for praise, you know that kind of way. I don't care, I don't care what they think.

Interviewer: Right.

Raymond: I'm not being smart...



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Interviewer: No, go on.

Raymond: Once I know I'm there and doing what I am for my kids  
I'm happy.

The importance of illustrating this interaction, is it demonstrates that it is not simply what gets asked, but how it is asked/posed that matters in effective child and family work. Our findings show that fathers in general like a 'strengths based' approach which gives the man a chance to say what positive things he is getting out of fatherhood and intervention. As the above interaction shows, the father was much more prepared to openly engage when the interviewer changed tack away from questions which implied a judgement of the man ("have you improved as a father") to an open-ended positive oriented question ("what are you getting out of coming here?"). Yet his subsequent closure around not needing praise shows how even such strengths based approaches are never easy with men who are too proud, or conditioned otherwise to admit to their need for affirmation and support. Some men appear to need to enact a protest masculinity, to play out a particular notion of the invulnerable man, even while in practice they are receiving more help than they are prepared to admit. A key to this perhaps lies in Raymond's comments about the residential addiction programme he quite recently completed.

*Oh, it was hard like, you know, fucking prodding and poking into your private life like and I wasn't used to that like. But I had to build a wall when I was on the street, I had to build a wall, you had to be tough. You know what I mean, because if you're not, you're fucked you know what I mean. Trying to break through the wall, it was hard alright.*

*... they tried to make me see why I done these things.*

The personal resources needed to survive a lifestyle based on protest and self destructiveness, negate the skills and sensitivities that are needed to overcome and heal what is driving such behaviour. Refusing support and therapeutic help is not merely an ideological preference, but a visceral necessity, a requirement which is inscribed in the very ("walled") bodies of the men. Admitting to finding intervention helpful, is tantamount to admitting vulnerability because it concedes that there was something with which help was

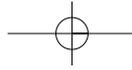
needed in the first place. For those men who don't wish to 'go there', other ways have to be found to engage them. According to Ann, Raymond "bottles-up" his feelings. So it is not just with social researchers that he resists being vulnerable. Yet he clearly is capable of talking very openly about his feelings for his partner and children. This has implications for practice approaches which need to enable men who struggle in this way to narrate about their children and avoid questions which demand an acknowledgement of too much vulnerability. In other words, the questions need to be strengths based and solution focused, centred on what he feels he is doing well with his children. Questions which focus on the men's deficits and failures will have them (or the professional!) out the door before you can say: "And just why do you have such a problem with ...?". A crucial part of all early work with fathers has to include assessing the man's capacities to do particular kinds of work, such as his expressiveness, emotionality and openness to being seen as vulnerable, and to design intervention approaches accordingly.

As we have suggested, something of this dynamic of positively re-framing interviewing approaches is evident in the above extract. Once the interviewer intuits the man's struggle with his approach and asks: "OK, what, OK, that's a better way of saying it: what are you getting out of going to [the unit]?", he begins to get a more positive response from the father. While still remaining cautious, the father responds to the strengths based questions and even goes on to disclose that the unit has offered him help that he badly needed:

As a couple now it makes us spend time, more time together and they say look if you want to go out now, we'll mind the kids and you know, that like, you know, which we'll do. We have a good laugh like. The first time ever we have a good laugh, well not the first time ever, but the first time for ages. Before it was a pain in the ass, everything was up in a heap, I was probably out on the streets drinking a bottle of wine.

Such 'holding' spaces need to be seen not only in terms of current provision in enabling people to cope, but for the stability and value they offer as secure bases for vulnerable parents to access if and when future trouble arises.

*I'd be off the wagon, I would. I'd be demented again I'd say. ... It's a good place, more stable like d'you know what I mean. And then if they know you, you can call up and whatever like.*



## Leaving Fathers Out

Raymond's hopes for the future are simple enough:

*Well I don't plan too ahead, you know, too far ahead at all. I just, I just want us to be happy. I want my kids with me, you know, in a family home. I want, I want somewhere to live like I said a while ago, I just want to live ...*

And the unit staff are optimistic:

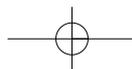
*we are hoping a lot for this couple and hopefully it'll work. As I said, it's great to see the fathers involved but that's not always the case.*

### 5.7 Concluding recommendations

**Young marginalised fathers constitute perhaps the most vulnerable single group of fathers, in this study, and in Irish society . . .**

Young marginalised fathers constitute perhaps the most vulnerable single group of fathers, in this study, and in Irish society. We have shown the enormous pressures to exclude them from relationships with their partners and children that they have to routinely face. They are judged negatively and discounted from fatherhood and family life because of their social exclusion, and lay (especially extended families) and professional knowledge (especially social workers) of their 'wildness': the criminality, substance misuse, predatory heterosexuality and violence they enact collectively, with other men in public. We have characterized this, following Connell (1995), as the enactment of a 'protest masculinity' and the core challenge for professionals is to see beyond it if they are to actively begin including such men as fathers. Once again, this chapter has shown that understanding the multiple sides to such men is crucial to appreciating their struggles, and those of their partners and children in working effectively with them.

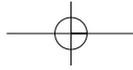
In a context of overwhelming failure, vulnerable young men can see fatherhood as an opportunity to succeed in a meaningful way in their lives. Promoting active fatherhood needs to be seen by policy makers and practitioners as a form of social inclusion. For this to be effective, our data shows the importance of actively involving young fathers from the



moment of pregnancy awareness, at the birth and in the early months and years of the child's life. This helps the men to take on a fatherhood identity from the start and live out their bond with the child through shared parenting, rather than trying to fit in around the mother's dominant role. A core aim of intervention should be to get the couple onto the same 'developmental pathway' as parents. Intervention work which helps the woman to let go of control and responsibility, and the man to accept it in a way which gives him a legitimate and trustworthy space in the domestic life of the family, is crucial to balancing the developmental pathways of couples, to creating negotiated outcomes in terms of gender roles and relationships.

Our findings suggest that the main problem with vulnerable young fathers is not their capacities to care for their children, but their reliability and consistent availability to do so. Professionals need to see beyond the façade of 'hard man' inscrutable masculinity the father presents to the world, include and engage him in dialogue around his fathering and what he needs to develop. We have shown that a key requirement in work with vulnerable young fathers (and mothers) is to find a way of containing and channelling their energy and passion, of 'holding' the man in his family sufficiently to enable the development of his caring capacities, and their triumph over the desire for protest. Conventional casework approaches to such men - where they are seen periodically in their homes by social workers - have their place, but these men, because of their marginality, need more. The 'holding' of the men and/in their family that is required needs an actual physical environment, a place to which they can attach, where the concerted work that needs to go on, can be done. We recommend therefore that residential and intensive day care facilities need to be developed to work with vulnerable young fathers and their families, as entire units.

Practice approaches need to enable men to narrate about their children and avoid questions which demand an acknowledgement of too much vulnerability. In other words, the questions need to be strengths based and solution focused, centred on what he feels he is doing well with his children. A crucial part of all early work with fathers has to include assessing the man's capacities to do particular kinds of work, such as his expressiveness, emotionality and openness, to being seen as vulnerable, and to design intervention approaches accordingly.



### Leaving Fathers Out

It is of vital importance that the structural conditions which contribute so significantly to the exclusion of working class fathers are addressed. In particular we recommend that the father's status as a recipient of state benefits should at all times be kept separate from his identity as an (active) father. The same goes for mothers, who also have an economic incentive to claim the lone-parent allowance, omit the father's name from the birth certificate and effectively write the father officially out of family life. Mothers and fathers need to get the message from professionals that how they choose to survive economically in a milieu of poverty and daily struggle is their business, but excluding fathers and denying children an opportunity to have an active father is morally unacceptable.

